



REPORT ON THE CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE SEMINAR ON AFGHAN PERCEPTIONS

WAR ON TERRORISM STUDIES: REPORT 5

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QUICK LOOK REPORT: CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE SEMINAR ON AFGHAN PERCEPTIONS

BACKGROUND. A Cultural Intelligence Seminar on Afghan Perceptions was conducted on December 17, 2001 at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies in Arlington, VA. Approximately twelve Afghans and Afghan-Americans participated in the seminar representing a mix of the tribal affiliations that will make up the post-Taliban interim government. Some participants have advised members of the interim government, and Prime Minister-Designate Karzai's first cousin attended. The Deputy Prime Minister desired to attend but was called away on other business.

OBSERVATIONS OF INTEREST TO MARINES CURRENTLY DEPLOYED IN AFGHANISTAN

- When dealing with Afghans, the concepts of honor and dignity must be observed. If these are shown to an Afghan, he (or she) will reciprocate in kind. It is a poor but proud country. Pride is a key concept. Afghans do not react well to condescension and are sensitive to perceived arrogance on the part of foreigners.
- An attitude of mutual respect is advised.
- The concept of hospitality is very important to Afghans. They will die to defend a guest. Acting like a good guest is probably the best advice one can give in dealing with Afghans.
- Respect for elders, including even low status individuals like beggars, is key in Afghan society. Age equates with respect regardless of social status or gender.
- Women head the real fabric of the household and wield considerably more influence than the Taliban experience would dictate. Afghans are very conservative about women by Western standards, and the abusive treatment of women by the Taliban is not the norm. Several do's and don'ts regarding women were offered:
 - Don't touch women under any circumstances. Even a handshake or friendly pat on the shoulder is considered to be overly familiar and out of place.
 - Treat women as you would your mother. Show respect and deference.
 - Never enter an Afghan house without asking permission; this is particularly true if women are present. Also, males should never enter the house unless there is a male present.
 - Unlike some Arab countries, western women in uniform will be afforded the respect accorded by their rank and perceived position of authority.

- Afghan women are conservative and may elect to continue to wear the Burka, but the key word here is “elect.” They want the ability to make the choice.
- There is no caste system in Afghanistan. Some people have more opportunities than others, but social mobility is a function of individual achievement. The Afghans tend to judge people by their actions rather than by birthright. Family, clan, and tribe remain key concepts in society.
- The U.S. has a tremendous opportunity to do good things for Afghanistan and positively impact the rest of the Islamic world’s perception of the U.S. The participants admitted that returning Afghan expatriates might well be viewed with more suspicion than foreigners. Despite the bombing, American stock is very high right now. Their gratitude is ours to keep or lose depending on our actions.

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING LONGER TERM INTERAGENCY AND NATION-REPAIR OPERATIONS

- Nation building is a term to be avoided. Nation repair or state building may be a better term. The Afghans are acutely aware that they were a coherent nation when Alexander the Great invaded them. They gladly will accept aid, but it should be a collaborative effort; if they view it as being dictated, resentment will likely result. It is essential that Afghans are involved in every phase and that the United Nations and the multinational force maintain constant communication with the interim government and local people. Perhaps the most resonating idea is the need to establish the interim government as a legitimate and respected actor on the world stage. If it is seen as anyone’s puppet, it will have no credibility at all.
- It is possible to make too much of the nation’s ethnic and tribal differences. In the end, Afghanistan may more resemble a loose coalition of cantons than the United States, but the differences are not beyond reconciliation. The group that participated in the seminar reflected less individual tribal or ethnic group differences and more cohesiveness as one nation.
- We need to remember that the victory over the Taliban and al Qaeda was a collaborative effort. The Afghans will want us to remember that fact.
- The participants felt that some sort of international force will be necessary to get the interim government on its feet. Muslim nations such as Jordan, Kuwait, and Turkey would probably be acceptable, as would the traditional UN neutrals such as the Nordic states and Austria; perhaps even Japan.
- The participants stressed that rebuilding a national sense of trust will be critical. Over twenty years of resistance to the Soviets and civil war has degenerated trust.

- Much technical and academic expertise has been lost. Much of it may drift back, but reestablishing the education system will be a critical component toward the long-term goal of rebuilding the nation.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT. The participants displayed a high level of optimism that contrasts markedly with the pessimistic attitude of many western journalists regarding the ability of the Afghans to make a go of a post-Taliban government. After six years of Taliban repression, this seems to them to be a very promising opportunity for their nation. They stressed that the Afghan people want to get themselves on their feet and will work hard to do so. They stressed that the U.S. and follow-on multinational efforts should convey their goals clearly and honestly and that all tribes and ethnic groups should be represented fairly in any post-Taliban government.